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## Celebration of the Semi-Centennial of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858.

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Fifty years ago, the attention of the whole country was turned to the then Western State of Illinois. The war cloud was rising in the south, and the new territories beyond the Mississippi were beginning to attract the attention of many settlers, and as the importance of the trans-Mississippi country began to be realized by the people, general interest in the subject of the extension of slavery was felt, and was crystallized in the halls of the Congress of the United States. Should Kansas and Nebraska come into the Union as free or slave states? That was the burning question of the day. Nebraska was to *have* territorial government, but it was divided by the measures of 1854, and the southern part was called Kansas. Mr. Douglas believed that the people of the territories ought to decide for themselves as to whether or not their states should be slave or free. Mr. Lincoln believed there should be no more slave states. The story of the eloquent debates between these two intellectual giants is too well known to need re-telling. Mr. Lincoln was nominated by his party, as its choice for a seat in the Senate of the United States at the State convention held at Springfield, June 16, 1858, for the place then filled by Stephen A. Douglas. Mr. Douglas was a candidate for re-election. The two sides of the controversy were presented to the people of Illinois in a series of speeches by the two champions; and their adherents became excited to a burning enthusiasm. Speeches were made at various towns by each, and it became the custom for them to reply to charges made in the speeches of the other, and finally, Mr. Lincoln, on the advice of friends, sent a challenge to Mr. Douglas, asking him to meet him in joint debate upon the questions of the day. The challenge was accepted and seven great joint debates were held. These debates called the attention of the whole country to the senatorial contest in Illinois and have been called the introduction of the State into politics, as a great force which must be considered in all political plans of a national character. John T. Morse, Jr., a biographer of Mr. Lincoln, in speaking of the first published edition of the debates, says:

"It is just appreciation, not extravagance, to say that the cheap and miserable little volume, now out of print, containing in bad newspaper type 'THE LINCOLN AND DOUGLAS DEBATES,' holds some of the masterpieces of oratory of all ages and nations."

Seldom, if ever, have people had an opportunity such as was given the people of Illinois in 1858, to learn the fundamental reasons for

political tenets and beliefs. The debates are unique. They have often been imitated, but as there have fortunately, been no questions before the people involving such vital principles, and perhaps no such men as Lincoln and Douglas to present the issues, there has been nothing like these meetings in the forum of the people. The Lincoln-Douglas debates stand alone in our history. They mark an epoch in the career of each of these two great men. They mark an era in the history of Illinois. They mark an era in the history of the nation. They introduced Abraham Lincoln to the people of the United States, and they brought Illinois to place and power in the nation. So it is proper that the people of Illinois should, in a fitting manner, celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of these great intellectual and moral struggles. The Illinois State Historical Society hopes to assist the people of the various towns where the original debates occurred in commemorating these historic events. A committee of the State Society has been named with a member in each of the towns. The society has no wish to dictate in the matter of local celebrations. It wishes merely to assist the local committees. The secretary of the Historical Society and Honorable Clark E. Carr, the chairman of the committee of the Historical Society, will gladly answer any questions or render any assistance in their power.

The society begs to offer the following suggestions:

The celebrations will occur at each of the seven towns where the original debates occurred and should be given on the anniversary of the original debate, and at the same hour of the day, and as nearly as may be practicable, on the same spot where the original debate occurred.

At Ottawa, Friday, August 21, 1908.

At Freeport, Thursday, August 27, 1908.

At Jonesboro, Tuesday, September 15, 1908.

At Charleston, Friday, September 18, 1908.

At Galesburg, Wednesday, October 7, 1908.

At Quincy, Tuesday, October 13, 1908.

At Alton, Thursday, October 15, 1908.

It is certainly time to have plans made for these celebrations.

Each town should have an orator to make an address or perhaps two orators, one to speak on Mr. Lincoln, and one to speak on Senator Douglas. It will be well to have special provisions made for those persons who heard the original debates. It might be well to have a memorial badge, or souvenir, to indicate these survivors. Ask the ladies of each town to show the costumes that were worn by the women on the day of the original debate. There will probably be some one among the older ladies who will have some articles of dress which were worn by some woman of her acquaintance on the historic day. Have these survivors occupy seats of honor, either on the platform or in comfortable and conspicuous places. It is of the utmost importance that orators of reputation and ability be secured at once. These selections should be made as soon as possible. Each of these towns have been visited by Honorable Clark E. Carr, the chairman of

the committee of the Illinois State Historical Society. Colonel Carr held conferences in each of the towns and made many excellent suggestions, which are, no doubt, remembered.

The most important thing of all is that these celebrations should be given by the whole town, that there should be no party politics nor cliques in them. Make every effort to have it a celebration by the people of your town, your county, your vicinity. Try to secure the best possible speakers. Your newspapers will be of the greatest assistance to you. Be sure to have a committee on advertising or publicity.

The time is short. There must be no delay. If these meetings are to be successful, you must work, and you must work hard, and must work together. The woman's clubs will assist greatly with the details. The school children must take part. The Historical Society will be very glad to have the written reminiscences of as many as possible of the persons who heard the original debates. The board of directors of the Illinois State Historical Library some months ago, appointed a commission to examine into the value of historical documents before the library published them. A committee from this commission with Prof. E. E. Sparks as chairman, has prepared a circular on the semi-centennial of the debates, and the State Department of Public Instruction published the circular. It contains many helpful suggestions. Copies of it can be obtained by writing to the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Let me say again that the time is short and the work is great. Lose no time. Make every effort to have your own local celebration the best of the seven. Call on the secretary of the Illinois Historical Society for any aid which is in her power. This is to be for the Historical Society, the special work of the summer of 1908.

The State Historical Society is hoping to have for the celebration of the one hundredth anniversary of Mr. Lincoln which occurs February 12, 1909, a very great exhibit of souvenirs of Mr. Lincoln and his times. It is hoped that this celebration of the debates may be the means of procuring much interesting material for this exhibit. Persons having letters, addresses, books, pamphlets or pictures of Mr. Lincoln or Senator Douglas or of persons or events connected with either of them will please inform the secretary of the society of the existence of such valuable material.

Chairmen of local committees are *earnestly requested to report* to the secretary of the society what steps have already been taken towards the celebration. It will greatly facilitate the work if these reports are made at once.

The time is short, the labor is great, the occasion is one of great historic importance. No other such opportunity will probably, come to your community for at least another fifty years. Let us make the celebration worthy of the great actors, and let them be models of what a celebration of a great historic event may be. Let them be filled with enthusiasm, harmony and broad patriotism.